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AUTHOR Jackson, Elaine E.; Schuyler, Nancy B.
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ABSTRACT

Based on seven years of surveying students, parents, and educators, the following conclusions were reached: (1) preliminary telephoning of graduates to verify addresses did not produce higher returns from those contacted; (2) cover letters printed on more expensive colored-letterhead stationary did not produce a higher return rate than the same letter photocopied all in black; (3) no differences were found in return rates from graduates whose surveys were mailed to arrive on Wednesday and those whose questionnaires were to arrive on Saturday; (4) fewer responses were received from graduates who received "cute" reminders than from those whose reminders were more businesslike; (5) no difference was found in return rate on parent questionnaires when half were mailed first class and half bulk rate; (6) on computer-printed teacher questionnaires, half of the teachers who returned questionnaires did not respond to the free-response items; and (7) free-response items where blank spaces were left for responses were completed more often by administrators than those where lines were printed in. Additional post hoc findings and an optical-scan form on which to print unique questionnaires are also described. (BW)

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PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT?
SKILLS GAINED IN SEVEN YEARS OF QUESTIONNAIRES

Elaine E. Jackson
Nancy B. Schuyler

Office of Research and Evaluation
Austin Independent School District
6100 Guadalupe
Austin, Texas 78752

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PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT?

SKILLS GAINED IN SEVEN YEARS OF QUESTIONNAIRES

Looking back at the title of this paper after a lapse of six months, I found that the question mark best expresses where we are now. Last summer, after seven years of surveying students, graduates, teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents, a paper on our progress seemed appropriate.

Not only had we learned a number of things about what matters and what doesn't, but we also had learned how to learn. The first "finding" came by accident: we tried to telephone all of a sample of graduates to verify their addresses, but only reached about half. There was no difference in the return rate from those contacted and those not. We were surprised.

After that we began to set up "experiments": take a random sample and assign one randomly divided half to one condition and the other half to a different condition. Even changing just one aspect of the procedure for any one survey you can draw a number of conclusions if you send out enough different questionnaires over enough years, and keep good records.

We tried to find ways to improve return rates, ways to save money, and ways to get more information. We also tried to limit the number of questionnaires staff received by collecting information for other District departments. The things we learned this way are summarized below, and in Attachment A are listed the individual surveys we have conducted, with factors we've varied, and the return rates.

- Preliminary telephoning of graduates to verify addresses did not produce higher returns from those contacted.
- Cover letters printed on (more expensive) colored-letterhead stationary did not produce a higher return rate than the same letter photocopied all in black.
- No differences were found in return rates from graduates whose surveys were mailed to arrive on Wednesday and those whose questionnaires were to arrive on Saturday. (Reminders were mailed on the same schedule.)
- Fewer responses were received from graduates who received "cute" reminders than from those whose reminders were more businesslike.
- No difference was found in return rate on parent questionnaires when half were mailed first class and half bulk rate.

- On computer-printed teacher questionnaires, half of the teachers who returned questionnaires *did not* respond to the free-response items.
- Free-response items where blank spaces were left for responses were completed more often by administrators than those where lines were printed in.

We learned some other things post hoc, just by looking at what came back.

- Reminders (with a new survey included) substantially increased returns.
- The highest response rate to a parent questionnaire on counseling was from parents of elementary students, with the lowest response from parents of high school students and the rate from parents of junior high students in the middle.
- Over-sampling of graduates with grade averages below 85 for the Former Student Questionnaire achieved a returned sample that matched the District on percentages in each grade range.
- Return rates from both teachers and administrators have improved over three years as the annual survey became more routine and we gave feedback on summaries of results.
- The lowest return rate ever from graduates came the year we mailed questionnaires in April instead of February.
- We could limit the number of items any one teacher or administrator questionnaire included yet answer a large pool of items by matrix sampling and computer generating a unique survey for each teacher and administrator.

We were pleased with the process. We were using systematic experimental design to answer questions for our evaluations. We were providing more information for more staff with more confidence in our results. So why the big question mark?

Although computer generating unique questionnaires for teachers and administrators was obviously the way to go - few items per person, true random assignment of items, specific items to targeted individuals or groups, and many items included for staff districtwide - processing was costly. Keypunching 1,500 unique questionnaires took time. We needed thing we had never seen. We wanted an optical-scan form on which to print (by computer) our unique questionnaires. Attachment B shows what we have developed.

We ordered 250,000 of these last November. Needless to say there were some bugs in the system the first time we used them, for 15,000 high school student questionnaires. But they did print, and they did scan, and nobody mutilated the form too badly. The system is here to stay.

So far this year we have used this form for three sets of surveys, for students, teachers, and administrators. All the District's high school students received questionnaires. Each student was asked a set of seven standard items about vocational courses and summer-job needs, and each student also received two randomly assigned questions from a pool of 13 items. This gave us responses from 1,400 to 1,600 student per item. These were printed with teacher and student name, and arranged to be boxed by school. When they were returned, they were scanned and the most urgently needed information was immediately ready for the schools in print outs.

For the administrator and teacher surveys, quick scanning of returned forms let us print reminders and envelope labels only for personnel who had not yet returned theirs. We had a pool of 120 items for teachers, but asked each teacher to respond to only about 25.

So this is an innovation that will streamline our whole survey operation. There were some problems with these first efforts, but the procedure seemed understandable to those who had to use it. There were no wrinkled or torn forms, and only one staple got hung in the scanner. We may make a few changes in the form layout before we print more this summer. We will probably try the format with younger students next year - junior high and possibly upper elementary. We may use it with next year's Former Student Questionnaire. And next year we will start "experimenting" again:

- Send half the graduates a printed form and half the scannable form to check whether they respond better or worse to it.
- Think up some items to get at staff reactions to the forms themselves.
- Use a teacher advisory group we are forming to pilot new items and formats.

All this has ranged rather far from "what any little school can do to get better return rates." We have entered High Tech - we've traded low-skill tasks for automation, but this means we use an experienced data analyst and extensive computer files. We've come a long way from wondering whether

blue or yellow paper would produce better returns, and I don't think we are going back. I would still like to include quarters with half the parent questionnaires, but don't think the finance office would approve purchase orders for rolls of quarters!

Probably the most important thing we've learned is that we *can* get usable returns on surveys. We've moved from "send questions home with every student and report the 10% that come back" to random samples small enough to send multiple reminders. We use computers extensively, and highly trained personnel. We spent time on the items (that's another whole paper) both on gathering them from across the District and on writing them well. We try to learn from the mistakes we continue to make. We continue to *plan* the questionnaires and the surveying procedures and to try new ideas.

STAFF SURVEYS

DATE	GROUP	SAMPLE	FACTORS EFFECTING RETURNS	RETURN RATE
1/17/77	Teachers	100% HS = 954	66 items 1 reminder after 2 weeks	83%
1/17/77	Counselors	100% HS = 49	63 items about counseling/advising 1 reminder	100%
1/17/77	Non-teaching Personnel	100% HS = 174	32 items 1 reminder	88%
12/07/78	Professionals (New & due evaluation)	120	15 items memo to principals & supervisors about their staff getting the questionnaires no reminder	58%
5/02/79	Professionals	514	25 items memo to principals & supervisors 1 reminder	76%
3/04/81	Teachers	18% All= 578	25 items, half to each half of total group 1 reminder	71%
3/19/81	Administrators	50% All= 156	17 items 1 reminder	82%
3/02/82	Teachers	100% of 1 HS 100% of 1 JHS 100% of Migrant 50% of remaining = 1582	63 items (9 to 14 items per teacher) computer generated, matrix sampled some items to specific teachers or groups, others random 1 reminder after 3 weeks TWO OPEN-RESPONSE ITEMS----------	80% 53%
3/01/82	Administrators	100% of those not surveyed '81 50% of new = 155	23 items 1 reminder THREE OPEN-RESPONSE ITEMS: HALF THE SURVEYS WITH 3 LINES PRINTED---------- HALF THE SURVEYS WITH BLANK SPACE FOR RESPONSE----------	85% 55% 69%
2/16/83	Teachers	100% of those not surveyed '82 50% of those who were 100% '82 50% of new = 1614	102 items (about 15 items per teacher) computer generated, matrix sampled some items to specific teachers or groups, others random	84%
2/14/83	Administrators	100% = 315	62 items (from 10 to some central to 33 for some elementary) computer generated, matrix sampled some items to administrators with specific programs, the rest assigned by grade level CENTRAL ADMINISTRATORS--------- ELEMENTARY CAMPUS---------- SECONDARY CAMPUS----------	90% 94% 93% 79%
2/28/83	Counselors	100% = 76	28 items for elementary, 31 items for secondary items about counseling no reminder in mail, telephone follow up	100%

PARENT SURVEY

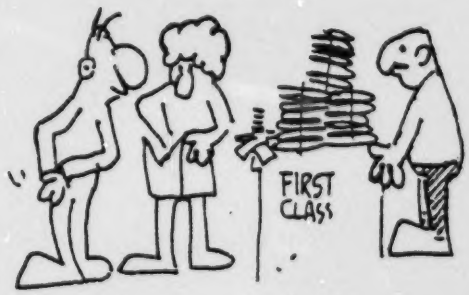
2/14/83	Parents	Parents of: 6th graders=200 8th graders=200 11th graders=200	14 items for secondary, 12 items for elementary about counseling 33 returned for incorrect address, so about 577 REACHED PARENTS----------	62% 64%

GRADUATE SURVEYS

EACH OF THESE SURVEYS WAS PRINTED FRONT AND BACK ON LIGHT BLUE PAPER, WITH ABOUT 35 ITEMS, ON CONTINUING EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT STATUS, SATISFACTION WITH THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION, AND GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE DISTRICT.

- Each went out with a computer-printed address label and the envelope was metered with first-class postage,
- Each contained a cover letter signed by the Superintendent of Schools,
- Each included a first-class postage metered self-addressed return envelope.
- All reminders included "reminder" cover letter, new questionnaire, and another metered return envelope,
- Each questionnaire had a sequence number stamped in the upper right corner, but not the graduate's name,
- Each cover letter mentioned the number, and stressed that no graduate's name would be linked with responses.

DATE	CLASS OF	NUMBER OF GRADUATES	SAMPLE SIZE	UNDELIVERABLE	FACTORS AFFECTING RETURNS	RETURN RATE
2/01/77	1976	3229	254	?	Half addresses verified by phone 3 reminders, 3rd special delivery	78%
2/08/78	1977	3416	450	8%	3 reminders, 3rd special delivery	67%
2/01/79	1978	3656	522	7%	Preliminary letter 12/13/78 HALF ORANGE LETTERHEAD COVER LETTER, HALF BLACK COPY-----BOTH RETURNS------- 2 reminders, HALF WITH "CUTE" NOTES HALF WITH BUSINESSLIKE (62% of returns got businesslike reminders)	59% 35%
1/30/80	1979	3403	535	?	Letter with summary of Class of 78 data - 4/79 - sent via counselors 3 reminders	66%
2/03/81	1980	3144	566	6%	3 reminders HALF MAILED TUESDAY------ HALF MAILED FRIDAY------- (Before reminders, Tues. = 30% Fri. = 33%)	66% 69% 63%
1/15/81	1977	3416	450	25%	2 reminders (RETURN RATE FOR THOSE DELIVERED--54%) Sample was graduates already surveyed 2/08/78, 9 months after graduation--all in original sample sent surveys	40%
4/8/83	1982	3357	659	7%	1 reminder 196 GRADUATES GPA = 85----- 463 GRADUATES GPA 85----- (sample returned *matched* the District grade distribution, and was close to the District for sex and ethnic dist.)	46% 63% 39%



AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
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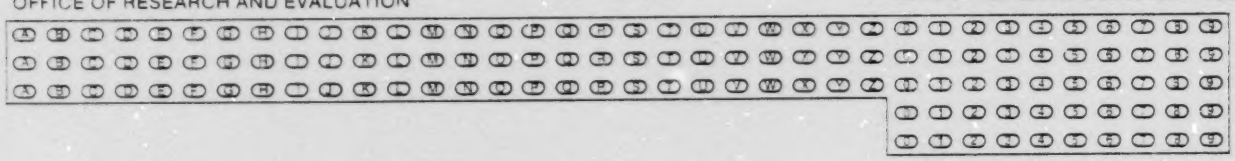
Attachment B

USE NO. 2 PENCIL ONLY



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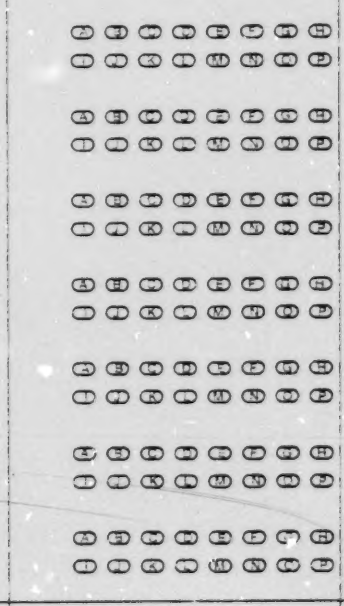

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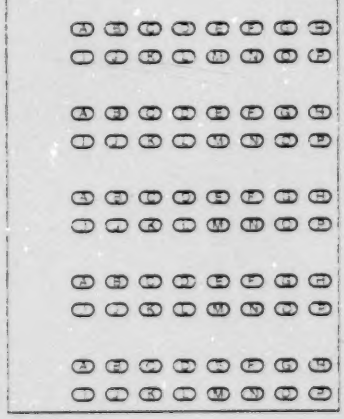

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